

Sunni and Shī‘ah Perspectives on Islām

نظرة أهل السنة والشيعة إلى الإسلام

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FOREWORD

The religious beliefs and practices of Shī'ahs distinguish and separate them from the entire Muslim *ummah*. The Shī'ahs have specific beliefs about the attributes of Allāh, the attributes of Allāh's messengers, the position and mission of Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ), and the authenticity of the Qur'ān. They even have their own unique moral codes. Unfortunately, because of their clannish nature and secretive doctrines, very few people have proper knowledge of their beliefs and practices.

Since its inception Shī'ism has been shrouded in mystery. The initial preaching and propagation of Shī'ism was done only through word of mouth. None of the twelve Shī'ah *imāms* left any documentary evidence of their teachings. It is strange that the Shī'ahs claim to follow Ja'farī *fiqh* when, in fact, Imām Ja'far (may Allāh be pleased with him) did not leave any evidence of having compiled *fiqh* rulings. And later, when the Shī'ahs did start writing about their beliefs, such writings were meant only for Shī'ahs – Sunnis¹ had no access to them. In these writings, sayings attributed to the twelve *imāms* are classified as "*ḥadīth*," thus eliminating any differentiation between them and the sayings of the Prophet (ﷺ).

Contrary to universal teachings of monotheistic religion, the Shī'ah doctrine of *taqiyyah*² teaches its followers to conceal their faith and to hide their beliefs. The following two so-called "*ḥadīths*," said to have been narrated by the sixth Shī'ah *imām*, Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq, clearly elaborate this point:

"One who exposes something from our religion
is like one who intentionally kills us."³

¹Throughout this book the term "Sunni" has been used in reference to the majority of Muslims, who follow the *sunnah* (way) of the Prophet (ﷺ) as conveyed by his *ṣaḥābah* (companions).

²i.e., caution, prudence or dissimulation.

³*Uṣūl al-Kāfī*, p. 88.

- While presenting the Shī'ah point of view, this book gives an exhaustive account of all the arguments used by the Shī'ahs in support of their beliefs. These consist of evidences from the Qur'ān, prophetic *ḥadīth*, the sayings of their *imāms*, and Islāmic history which Shī'ah scholars have used in support of their belief.
- Only Shī'ah sources, which are considered to be the most original and reliable by the Shī'ahs themselves, have been utilized to present the Shī'ah point of view.
- Every Shī'ah argument has been presented verbatim as it appears in the Shī'ah source. No deletion or addition has been made in any of the quotations.

Each Shī'ah position is accompanied by the Sunni perspective on the same issue, where evidences are taken mostly from the Qur'ān and sometimes from the Prophet's *ḥadīth*.

Separate annotated bibliographies have been presented for Shī'ah and Sunni sources at the end of this book.

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CALIPHATE VS. IMAMATE

One of the fundamental differences between the Sunnis and Shī'ahs concerns the issue of caliphate versus imamate. Sunnis believe in the validity of the elected caliphs, who were vested with leadership of the *ummah* after the demise of the Prophet (ﷺ). Shī'ahs believe that there were divinely designated *imāms* and consider the caliphs usurpers of the rights of *imāms*.

The fundamental difference between the Sunnis and Shī'ahs is not so much in the usage of the terms "caliph" or "*imām*" but in the total concept of caliphate and imamate. For Sunnis, the belief in caliphate is neither an essential nor a recommended part of the faith. When a person declares himself to be a believer, he only needs to testify: "I bear witness that there is no god but Allāh and that Muḥammad is His servant and His messenger."

But for Shī'ahs, belief in imamate is an integral and the most preferred part of faith. One's faith is accepted and complete only when he testifies: "I bear witness that there is no god but Allāh and that Muḥammad is His servant and His messenger and that 'Alī is the designated *imām* and trustee of Allāh."

The difference is further evident in the *adhān*¹ preceding congregational prayer in a Muslim society. It proclaims that there is no god but Allāh and that Muḥammad (ﷺ) is Allāh's Messenger. But the Shī'ah *mu'adhdhin* (caller) adds certain words not present in the original *adhān*, which are: "and 'Alī is the trustee and the nominated caliph of the Prophet, without anyone between them." Thus, next to belief in Allāh and the prophethood of Muḥammad (ﷺ), the belief in the designated succession of 'Alī is declared a part of the Shī'ah creed. The Sunnis point out that there is not a single verse in the Qur'ān that calls for belief in imamate. Thus, the first fundamental

¹The call to prayer.

difference between the two groups is in the very definition of a Muslim and what he believes.

The second fundamental difference is in the concept of prophethood and the noble mission of Muḥammad (ﷺ):

﴿الْيَوْمَ أَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ وَأَتِمَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَتِي وَرَضِيتُ لَكُمُ الْإِسْلَامَ دِينًا﴾

*"This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favor upon you and have approved of Islām for you as a religion."*²

This verse was revealed on the ninth of Dhul-Hijjah, 10 A.H., when the Prophet (ﷺ) delivered his famous *Farewell Address*. Muslim historians and Qur'ānic commentators also recorded that when the Prophet (ﷺ) recited these verses, Abū Bakr wept. People around him said that the verse declared the completion of Allāh's blessings. Abū Bakr replied that it also meant that the Prophet (ﷺ) had completed his mission and would not remain among them much longer. This proved to be true, and the Prophet (ﷺ) died soon after.

Shī'ah commentators on the Qur'ān give a unique explanation for the aforementioned verses. They assert that when the Prophet (ﷺ) was returning from his last pilgrimage and stopped at a place called Ghadeer Khumm, the Archangel Gabriel brought this command to him:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الرَّسُولُ بَلِّغْ مَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْكَ مِنْ رَبِّكَ وَإِنْ لَمْ تَفْعَلْ فَمَا بَلَغْتَ رِسَالَتَهُ وَاللَّهُ يَعْصِمُكَ مِنَ النَّاسِ﴾

*"O Messenger, announce that which has been revealed to you from your Lord, and if you do not, then you have not conveyed His message. And Allāh will protect you from the people."*³

² Sūrah al-Mā'idah, 5:3.

³ Sūrah al-Mā'idah, 5:67.

At that, they say, the Prophet (ﷺ) ordered the men to halt and assemble. He then proclaimed that 'Alī was his brother, his successor and the *imām* after him. Immediately thereafter, Allāh revealed:

﴿الْيَوْمَ أَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ وَأَتِمَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَتِي وَرَضِيتُ لَكُمُ الْإِسْلَامَ دِينًا﴾

*"This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favor upon you and have approved of Islām for you as a religion."*⁴

According to Shī'ahs, it was 'Alī's nomination to the imamate that completed Allāh's blessings upon the believers and made Islām acceptable to Allāh. Accordingly, the mission and the institution of prophethood would have been incomplete unless associated with and supplemented by the imamate of 'Alī. Sunnis, on the contrary, reject this interpretation and consider that the prophethood is an independent and perfect institution not contingent upon the belief in imamate.

THE SUNNI CONCEPT OF CALIPHATE

The Arabic term "*khalīfah*" means "successor" or "deputy." Thus, a caliph, in his personal capacity, is not a sovereign but only represents the true sovereign who is none other than Allāh, the Almighty. Consequently, exercising his powers, he cannot transgress the limits of his role set by Allāh. Should he do so, he would render himself liable to be removed from office.

The office of caliphate is not reserved for a certain family, nor do family connections have anything to do with this office. Once a caliph passes away, his office is not automatically transmitted to his son. The Muslim *ummah* must always choose a new caliph, as was the case in the choice of Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān and 'Alī.

⁴ Sūrah al-Mā'idah, 5:3.

A person cannot himself aspire to be the caliph. Through mutual consultation the *ummah* may confer this office upon any qualified Muslim, the primary considerations being personal integrity, piety, ability, and sound knowledge and practice of the Qur'ān and *sunnah*. The caliph must conduct his affairs by mutual consultation, and other individuals have the right to agree or disagree with him.

A caliph is a mortal human being with no supernatural powers or attributes. The caliphate was a political system, not an integral or preferred part of one's faith. The following verses of the Qur'ān support this view:

﴿إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ﴾

"Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allāh is the most righteous."⁵

﴿وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ لَيَسْتَخْلِفَنَّهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ كَمَا اسْتَخْلَفَ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ﴾

"Allāh has promised those who have believed among you and done righteous deeds that He will surely grant them succession [to authority] upon the earth just as He granted it to those before them."⁶

These verses highlight some of the salient features of the caliphate as opposed to imamate. A detailed presentation of what the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* say about caliphate will be discussed in a later section.

THE SHĪ'AH CONCEPT OF IMAMATE

The Arabic term "*imām*" means "leader" but carries a very special connotation in Shī'ah beliefs. This can be summarized as follows:

- The *imām* is designated by Allāh. Individuals have no freedom in the choice or election of an *imām*.
- The institution of imamate was reserved for 'Alī and his male progeny through Fāṭimah. Thus, when an *imām* dies, authority is automatically transferred to his eldest son.
- The *imāms* are considered infallible and divinely protected from all sin and human weakness.
- They are not seen as ordinary human beings but as equal in rank to the prophets in their attributes and their mission.

The belief in imamate is an integral and most important part of the Shī'ah faith. The following saying, attributed to the fifth Shī'ah *imām*, al-Bāqir testifies to this effect:

"Islām is based on five pillars: prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, *zakāh* and imamate. Of these, the most important and preferred one is the belief in imamate."⁷

This belief is common among all Shī'ahs. Various Shī'ah sub-sects, however, differ over the sequence and the number of their *imāms*. *Al-ithnā 'ashriyyah*, the dominant Shī'ah sect, believes there were a total of twelve *imāms*. The twelfth *imām* did not die but only disappeared, and now rules the world and guides the *ummah* in absentia. He will reappear before the Day of Judgement and proclaim his leadership.

Although Shī'ahs make these claims, they do not give any valid evidences from the Qur'ān in support of them. All verses quoted in Shī'ah sources in support of imamate are either incomplete or out of context. For example:

⁵ *Sūrah al-Hujurāt*, 49:13.

⁶ *Sūrah an-Nūr*, 24:55.

⁷ In contrast to these, the pillars of faith according to the Prophet's *sunnah* are: testimony to the divinity of Allāh and messengership of Muḥammad (ﷺ), prayer, *zakāh*, fasting and pilgrimage.

﴿إِنِّي جَاعِلُكَ لِلنَّاسِ إِمَامًا﴾

"Indeed, I will make you a leader [imām] for the people."⁸

Shī'ah literature, asserting the concept of imamate, invariably cites this portion of the verse and explains it by adding that the *imām* is always designated by Allāh. The complete verse, however, reads as follows:

﴿وَإِذِ ابْتَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ رَبُّهُ بِكَلِمَاتٍ فَأَتَمَّهُنَّ قَالَ إِنِّي جَاعِلُكَ لِلنَّاسِ إِمَامًا قَالَ وَمِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِي قَالَ لَا يَنَالُ عَهْدِي الظَّالِمِينَ﴾

"And [mention, O Muḥammad], when Abraham was tried by his Lord with words [i.e., commands] and he fulfilled them. [Allāh] said, 'Indeed, I will make you a leader for the people.' [Abraham] said, 'And of my descendants?' [Allāh] said, 'My covenant does not include the wrongdoers.'"⁹

When read as a whole, the verse completely negates the Shī'ah concept of hereditary imamate. It speaks of Abraham, who was a divinely designated prophet and leader of his people.

A second example can be found in this verse:

﴿وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا﴾

"And We made them leaders [imāms], guiding by Our command."¹⁰

The Shī'ah explanation of this verse is that an *imām* is always inspired and designated by Allāh. Thus, the Muslim *ummah* has no choice in the selection or election of their leaders. Again, Shī'ahs quote the verse without regard for the preceding ones which define the pronoun "them."

⁸ Sūrah al-Baqarah, 2:124.

⁹ Sūrah al-Baqarah, 2:124.

¹⁰ Sūrah al-Anbiyā', 21:73.

﴿وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُ إِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ نَافِلَةً وَكُلًّا جَعَلْنَا صَالِحِينَ. وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْهِمْ فِعْلَ الْخَيْرَاتِ وَإِقَامَ الصَّلَاةِ وَإِيتَاءَ الزَّكَاةِ وَكَانُوا لَنَا عَابِدِينَ﴾

"And We gave him [i.e., Abraham] Isaac and Jacob in addition, and each [of them] We made righteous. And We made them leaders, guiding by Our command. And We inspired to them the doing of good deeds, establishment of prayer, and giving of zakāh; and they were worshippers of Us."¹¹

These two verses speak again of prophets, who were divinely appointed. But Shī'ahs quote only the portion which they associate with their *imāms*.

THE SPECIAL ATTRIBUTES OF SHĪ'AH IMĀMS

Since Shī'ah *imāms* are said to be divinely designated, they must possess special attributes and powers. One who believes in the concept of imamate also believes in unique attributes of the *imāms*. Following are a few quotations concerning their attributes from what are regarded as original sources of Shī'ah beliefs and practices.

◆ The Infallibility of the Imāms

1. All twelve *imāms* are infallible and absolutely immune from sin. They never (in their lives) committed any wrongs.¹²
2. All the *imāms* are infallible just like the prophets. The Shī'ahs derive their religion from their immaculate *imāms*.¹³

¹¹ Sūrah al-Anbiyā', 21:72-73.

¹² Minhāj al-Kirāmah, pp. 32-33.

¹³ Ibid., p. 22.